

BOOK REVIEWS

The Radical Housewife: Redefining Family Values for the 21st Century

Shannon Drury

Ukiah, CA: Medusa's Muse Press, 2014

REVIEWED BY JOANNA RADBORD

I really wanted to love *The Radical Housewife: Redefining Family Values for the 21st Century* by Shannon Drury. Instead, I felt like a no-fun outcast who was not sufficiently “cool enough” to enjoy my reading experience.

Drury was born in 1971. She went to a progressive college, identified as a feminist, and recognized that it made more economic sense to stay home with her children while her husband financially supported the family. Drury describes her involvement in Minnesota NOW, her promotion of access to abortion and birth control by deploying her status as a mother, her engagement in political campaigns, and her advocacy in support of making her child's school a welcoming space for children of LGBTQ families.

Drury connects her blossoming as an activist with her mothering and argues that feminism best respects and advances true “family values.” While her themes are important, I found Drury's sense of humour alienating and her rhetoric damaging to her credibility. For example, whether in a failure of feminist imagination, or pandering to laughs, Drury states, “the modern trend for on-demand breastfeeding is totally incompatible with paid work. Anyone who says otherwise is trying to sell you a \$400 Mendela Pump In Style...” (34).

Similarly, Drury portrays warring feminist and mothering “lifestyles,” in a chapter titled “parenthood proves your politics.” She contends that contemporary mothers “present themselves on a continuum of parenting ‘lifestyles,’ all of which contain the potential to make you new best friends or enemies” (30). Drury contrasts mothers who conceal their shameful breasts behind a tent from “lactivist” mothers who whip out their breasts with pride; she compares those who beg the boss for time to pump to those who stridently march to work with a pump at their side; and she pits proud co-sleepers against those cautious about falling asleep with baby, lest they become one of those “automaton” women who “let their kids chomp at their tits well into kindergarten,” behaviour which is a “little, well, *odd*” (p. 31). Drury has no regrets over a break-up with her best friend after the latter expresses interest in enrolling her daughter in a private Montessori school; for Drury, a good feminist (and a good friend) must support public education or is rightfully dismissed as a hypocrite.

At the same time, Drury complains that “modern feminism has done a pretty lousy job of taking apart the good mother/bad mother binary” (37). Drury’s own dualistic framing of mothers’ lives maintains, rather than disrupts, these same confining oppositions. Instead of Drury’s dismissive caricatures, a more helpful feminist lens could invite challenging, compassionate understanding of mothers’ contingent and contextual identities and circumstances. In Drury’s own words, a binary, oppositional approach “robs us of our own complexity and of our ability to see ourselves as genuinely interconnected” (37). To the extent the reader fails to align with Drury’s own subject position, I expect she is likely to feel some combination of emotional distance, guilt and/or disappointment.

Drury is a white, wealthy, married, American heterosexual, whose acknowledgement of privilege often came across as superficial and unfeeling. In recounting her experience with post-partum depression, Drury repeatedly tells us that her nursery rug is from Pottery Barn Kids; her label-dropping likely serves to distance those who cannot afford a nursery, let alone an expensive rug. Her lesbian friends’ twins “were so potently alive and beautiful that it was hard to believe they were the work of an endocrinologist in a lab coat.” Drury completely disassociates these children from their lesbian mothers, reducing them to the thrilling outcome of a science experiment. Drury describes “munching on potato chips that were making my own belly distend”, while [Live Aid’s children] “were lucky to lap at a mere cupful of gruel” (71). Here, extreme suffering is used to make a point in a “lighthearted manner” about indifference to overpopulation; starving children are the subject of a verb specifically applicable to animals. While the back cover promised a “hilarious” read, it appears I do not share Drury’s sense of humour.

Drury’s book works best in relating her own experiences, rather than as a polemic. Drury appears to have written contemporaneous, sometimes disjointed, pieces that feel much like blog entries. As a memoir, this is ultimately unsatisfying. I wanted to know more, to hear more detail, with more considered reflection, about her relationship with her son, his Asperger’s diagnosis, his involvement in her protest activity, and her differential expectations for him versus her daughter. I also wanted to learn more about her relationship with her husband and her depression.

Drury rightly objects to the right-wing “family values” discourse that denigrates some children, demonstrating a failure of respect for all families. Unfortunately, Drury’s book, subtitled as an attempt to redefine “family values,” disappoints when her sarcastic humour reveals a lack of empathy for the diversity of women’s circumstances and alienates those mothers who want to, and do, make different choices, such as combining direct-contact breastfeeding on-demand and engaging in meaningful paid work.